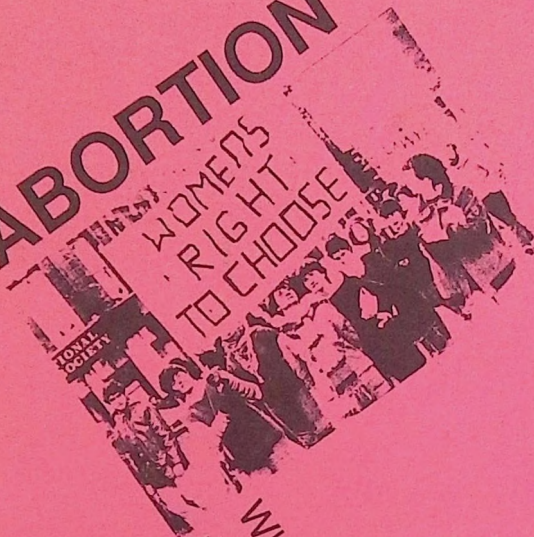


ABORTION



Why Irish women must
have the right to choose

G O R E T T H O R S E

BOOKMARKS IRELAND

Abortion: Why Irish women must have the right to choose.

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Published March 1990
Bookmarks Ireland, PO Box 1648, Dublin 8.

Cover Design: Hilary Morton

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introduction

Nowhere in the world do women have the right to control their own lives because nowhere do they have the right to control their fertility and decide if and when to have children. No country provides the free 24-hour childcare facilities, decent jobs with decent, paid maternity leave and the proper housing which would make the decision to have children a totally positive choice. Nor does any country give women free access to the technology necessary to choose not to have children - free contraception and abortion and sterilisation on request.

One of the basic features distinguishing human beings from animals is our ability to control and shape, not only the world about us, but also our own physical functions. It is this control which makes us more than slaves to our biology. In keeping with this human trait, women have always tried to control their fertility.

As far back as the eighth century, in the era when Ireland was known as "the island of saints and scholars", abortion was an accepted method of birth control. The marriage law held abortion to be punishable only if the woman didn't have her husband's permission. The punishment was for wifely disobedience, not for the act of abortion.

Abortion wasn't the only method of birth control. The stomach lining of goats and sheep was used as a kind of condom. The first edition of Peig Sayers' book on life on the Blasket Islands, *Peig*, published at the turn of the century, described how women on the islands used to fashion beeswax into a kind of diaphragm. Needless to say, this interesting and

it as an alternative form of contraception. That is nonsense. Women have more sense. They know that it is far easier, physically and emotionally, not to become pregnant than it is to terminate a pregnancy.

Women don't take abortion lightly. For many, the decision to have an abortion is a difficult one. But given the choice between bearing an unwanted child and abortion, many women do choose abortion. They make this decision as an exercise in control of their own lives.

Women controlling their lives is all very well, some people say, but abortion affects the life of another human being. Socialists don't deny that abortion involves ending life. But we also say that it is nonsense to regard a just-fertilised egg, or even an eight or ten week foetus as not just a form of life but as an actual human being.

Of course the foetus is a *potential* human being. But it is totally dependent on the woman who carries it. It can only continue to live if she lives, will not be nourished if she does not eat, will not receive oxygen if she does not breathe, will die if she dies.

It is totally dependent for its life on the use of her, and only her, body. As for the woman, her body is no longer her own. Women who used to hate milk start to drink it with relish while others who enjoyed nothing more than a pint of beer find all alcohol repellant. Drugs of all kinds are forbidden, even life-saving chemotherapy has to be stopped. Even for a woman who greeted news of her pregnancy with joy, the extent to which her body is no longer her own can be disturbing.

This relationship between the woman and the foetus she is carrying is quite unique. It is not one which should be forced on any woman. And precisely because it is a *unique* relationship, admitting the right of of a pregnant woman to decide whether or not she will continue to give life to the foetus holds no threat to the rights of the terminally ill, the senile, handicapped or otherwise dependent persons. For

neither they nor anyone else has, or seeks, a "right" remotely like the one anti-abortionists talk about - the right to live inside the body of another against that person's will.

That is why we must put the woman, her life and her right to control her life, before the rights of the foetus. The humanity the foetus has is abstract and cannot be compared to that of a woman without devaluing her life, her relationships, her hopes and aspirations.

Socialists see abortion as a political issue, not a moral one. Those who support abortion rights for women believe that each woman faced by an unplanned pregnancy must be allowed to decide for herself, in accordance with her own conscience, whether or not she wants to go ahead with the pregnancy. What makes abortion a political issue is the fact that the person whose life will be most intimately affected by the pregnancy is not allowed to make the decision. Instead, at present, it's made by TDs, MPs, doctors, lawyers, clergy, within the framework of laws shaped by the political process.

Abortion is also a class issue. When we fight for free, legal abortion in Ireland we expose the class hypocrisy which has always allowed rich women to terminate unwanted pregnancies in safety - for a high price. Today, it is possible for women with about a thousand pounds at hand to get an abortion (illegally but safely) in one of the private clinics that are flourishing in the North. The situation in the South is probably similar although it's difficult to say with certainty - doctors in the South are less free with their talk. But even if she has to go to England, a wealthy woman, North or South, doesn't have to undergo the fearful terror of the working class women who has to beg, borrow and lie to get the money together fast enough to get an abortion in England.

A lot of the time, controversy about abortion seems to have little to do with politics or class and

everything to do with morality. Late abortion is the most obvious case. Anti-abortionists argue that, as medical science advances, premature babies can survive at 28, 26 or even 24 weeks of gestation. So, they say, the upper limit for abortion should be reduced to 24, 20 or even 18 weeks.

In fact, most women who have abortions between 12 and 20 weeks have tried to get earlier abortions but have been held up by red tape, prejudice or, in the case of Irish women, a simple lack of information. Others are very young or are going through the menopause and hadn't realised they were pregnant.

There are very few abortions after 20 weeks - about 0.8 percent of the UK total. In the bulk of these cases the abortions are as late as this because the woman has discovered that her own health is in immediate danger or because the foetus is badly handicapped.

The amniocentesis test to discover if a foetus is suffering from a genetic disorder cannot be carried out until after 18 weeks of pregnancy; it takes at least three weeks for results to be analysed; counselling and arranging the abortion will take another week or two, so the woman is likely to be at least 22-23 weeks pregnant. If the time limit for abortion is dropped in Britain to below 28 weeks, many women will be forced to continue their pregnancies knowing that they are carrying a handicapped foetus.

It may seem contradictory that socialists who fight for the rights of the disabled, also support the right of a woman to abort a handicapped foetus. There is no contradiction. In capitalist society, the parents of a handicapped child face a life of constant struggle to help the child develop to his or her full potential. The parents are given no help in coming to terms with the grief of discovering that a child is handicapped. They have to fight for every scrap of information about the child's condition and for every form of treatment that might help. In some parts of the country, both North and South, there are

no physiotherapists, speech therapists or occupational therapists. Many parents of handicapped children move to the Dublin or Belfast areas to get their children better treatment, only to discover that things are only marginally better there.

Again, working class parents face the greatest problems in obtaining information about, and treatment for, their child's condition. Most working class people have neither the money nor the kind of job that allows them to move close to specialist schools. They don't have the money to buy the equipment, computers etc which can make such a difference to their child. And they have the constant worry about who will look after their child when they die. As long as society puts profits before the needs of disabled people, the question of whether a woman should be allowed to abort a foetus that is handicapped will remain a class issue, not a moral one.

Once society is organised to put the needs of people before profits, life for the disabled, and for the parents of disabled children, will be very different. Few parents would feel the level of pain and anger at having a handicapped child if they knew that s/he would get every chance in life; if society ensured that the child had hours of physiotherapy and speech therapy every day - not carried out by struggling parents, but by qualified paramedics whose job it was; if creches catered for children with special needs and ensured that they got extra stimulation to develop their mental and physical abilities to the full. In this situation, women would worry far, far less about having a handicapped child because society, not the individual parent, would carry the extra burden of caring for the child.

Abortion facts

Abortion is illegal in Ireland, North and South, yet over 100,000 Irish women have had abortions in England since it was legalised there in 1967. Up to 10,000 women go to England every year - that's more than twenty-five women every day, one hundred and eighty every week who leave Ireland to seek abortions.

These women come from every age group from 15 to 55; they come from every walk of life - they are workers in factories, hospitals and offices; they are housewives, students and unemployed. Many already have children, some have grown-up families and don't want to start all over again; some feel they are too old, some that they're too young to have a baby, or another baby; some are afraid of losing their jobs, of being unable to finish their education, or of not being able to cope with other children. Some cannot afford or simply do not want another child.

In certain age groups (22-25 years old) an Irish woman is as likely to have an abortion as her English counterpart. More Irish women have abortions per head of population than Dutch or Danish women. So, whatever the legal situation, abortion is very much an option for Irish women faced with unwanted pregnancy.

But it is an option about which it is difficult to get unbiased information. Since SPUC's injunctions stopped the Well Woman and Open Door counselling and referral services, the only information about abortion which many women who travel to England have is the lies of the anti-abortionists.

Abortion is presented by anti-abortionists as a

dangerous operation, with long-term physical and psychological effects. This is nonsense. The law in England only allows abortion if there is danger to the woman's life or health from continuing the pregnancy. The reason why abortion is available virtually on demand there in the early stages of pregnancy is that, up to twelve weeks, it is always safer to have an abortion than to give birth. These are medical facts, backed up by studies all over the world.

Anti-abortionists try to frighten women by talking about sterility and frequent miscarriages in later life due to the stretching of the cervix during abortion. This is scare talk and no more. Ninety percent of abortions in England are carried out before fourteen weeks. At this stage, the cervix is stretched *less* than it is in a D & C - the method by which many young women in Ireland are treated for painful and irregular periods.

There are of course some risks involved in abortion, just like any operation. But in early abortion these are very slight - usually problems of infection due to lack of proper medical back-up. Such problems are like those many women have after giving birth and are almost never serious, provided you follow your doctor's instructions.

Neither are reports of inevitable depression following abortion founded in fact. Most women go through a "weepy" period in the days immediately after the operation as their hormones get back to normal - the same kind of "blues" that many women have after having a baby. Studies show that with women who did suffer depression, it was because of external reasons - job, family, money, rejection by their boyfriend, reasons which had perhaps forced them into abortion. In fact, the feeling most often expressed by women who have had abortions, is relief.

Organisations like "Women Hurt By Abortion" are not about helping women. In fact, the "hurt" or

guilt faced by some women who have had abortions comes from just those kinds of organisations. Of course any woman will face real distress and hurt if she is forced by circumstances or by other people to have an abortion when she doesn't want to. But the way to stop this pain isn't to stop women who *want* an abortion from having one - that merely creates a different kind of hurt. The answer is to create the kind of society that provides decent childcare facilities, jobs and housing so that women would no longer be forced to terminate a pregnancy that they would ideally like to continue.

The truth is that much of the guilt felt by Irish women who have abortions is generated, not by feelings inside themselves but by the anti-abortion organisations who say abortion is murder. By allying themselves with SPUC's campaign to ban information about abortion and to stop non-directive pregnancy counselling, groups like "Women Hurt By Abortion" add considerably to this problem.

The fight for abortion rights in Ireland

When contraception was made slightly legal in 1979 it seemed as if Ireland's social legislation was gradually moving in the direction of the rest of Europe. Many socialists and feminists were confident that, as the 80s proceeded, contraception would become freely available, divorce would be introduced and eventually abortion would be made legal - at least for women who had been raped or whose lives were in danger.

The 80s turned out very differently. Instead of a continuing advance for women's rights, we saw the

anti-woman forces of the Right organise to push back the gains of the 70s. In the South, the anti-abortion referendum of 1983 and the divorce referendum of 1986 were massive defeats for those who support women's liberation. Nor did the right-wing hysteria of SPUC and Family Solidarity stop at the Border; every defeat for women's rights in the South had its effect on the North too, poisoning the political climate against progress for women and further unnerving politicians against taking a stand on less popular women's issues.

So what stopped the march of progress in Ireland?

The economic crisis had a great deal to do with it, by increasing SPUC and Family Solidarity's ability to demand that women be pushed back into the home.

During the 70s, as Ireland benefitted from belated economic expansion, women were needed in the workforce. The interests of the capitalist state conflicted with those of the Church. The state wanted women to look outside the home. The demands of the small but articulate women's movement now fitted in with the needs of the capitalist economy. That's when we saw the only victory of State over Church - the legalisation of contraception.

But the end of the seventies saw the end of economic expansion. As unemployment rose and cutbacks in health and social services started, the reactionary ideas of SPUC and Family Solidarity harmonised with the desire of the system to find a scapegoat for rising unemployment. With few Blacks or other racial minorities to attack for "taking jobs", the right of married women to work outside the home was the first right to be attacked. In the early 80s there were even suggestions that the Employment Equality Act should be changed to make discrimination against married women legal!

The economic crisis has also given added importance to the role of the Church in maintaining

"order" and "discipline" in Irish society. Particularly at a time when unemployment and poverty are rife and thousands of working class people, especially young people, are alienated from all authority, the Church plays a key role in ensuring that things don't slide out of control. At one and the same time, the Church - through its Social Justice committees - condemns the poverty and misery that people are forced to live in *and* defends the system that causes the misery. It protects the capitalist society we live in by operating to marginalise "reds", "extremists" and "agitators" who try to give political direction to working class anger.

It is because of the Church's role in ensuring social cohesion that the liberal wing of the ruling class - the Garrett FitzGerald followers - are deeply uneasy about confronting it. This was to prove crucial in the course of the set-piece battle over abortion in 1983. The FitzGeraldites opposed, then supported, then half-heartedly opposed the abortion amendment. The number of speakers on Anti-Amendment Campaign platforms who began with "I'm anti-abortion but . . ." far outweighed those who were willing to take on the Church and put women's rights before the Bishops'. The Campaign leadership courted every doctor, lawyer or Fine Gael stalwart who was willing to speak against the Amendment. This resulted in the argument against the Amendment being thought of as understandable only by "experts", as being far away from the day-to-day concerns of the mass of working people and as belonging to the realm of intellectual debate.

The established Left, too, has to bear its share of the responsibility for the anti-abortion amendment. The Labour members of the Coalition Government which presided over the referendum were unable to fight the Amendment consistently. Barry Desmond was Minister for Health and Social Welfare. He was against the Amendment. But he was also implementing the first of the health cuts and was part

of a government that jailed more than one group of striking workers. His credibility was low with working class people. And like the rest of his Party, he was afraid of losing votes by seeming pro-abortion.

Within the AAC, those to the left of the Labour Party (the Workers' Party did not join the AAC) argued that the Campaign should link up with the day to day struggles of working people - calling on the AAC to oppose the cuts, to support the jailed Ranks workers and the occupation of the Clondalkin Paper Mills. The only successful link that was made was with the gay groups who organised a march to Fairview Park after the men who killed Declan Flynn were let off by the judge because these killers had thought Flynn was gay. The support which the AAC had from the gay community after the march was an indication of the way solidarity breeds solidarity and an example of how a mass campaign *could* have been built.

But the Campaign leadership relied on half-hearted liberalism and the shock-troops of Catholic reaction, SPUC, were able to set women's rights in Ireland back more than a decade when 66 per cent of voters put the eighth amendment into the Constitution.

At the end of 1985, the liberals again showed the lily-like character of their livers when they consulted the Bishops on the proposed divorce legislation, begging them not to oppose such a timid measure. When that failed, they fumbled and fudged and accepted the terms of debate laid down by the sectarian anti-divorce brigade - concentrating on property rights, rather than on the rights of the thousands trapped in loveless marriages - and all the time pathetically assuring the Bishops that the measure would not lessen the Church's influence. As a result of their cowardice, tens of thousands of women, men and children continue to suffer the effects of the lack of divorce.

Who are

the anti-abortionists?

SPUC (Ireland), the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, is the best known and largest of the anti-abortion groups. SPUC was established in Britain in 1967 specifically to fight the new Abortion Act. Other SPUC organisations, e.g. in New Zealand, have been in countries where abortion is already legal. Ireland is in the unique situation of having anti-abortionists but no legal abortion. Abortion is totally illegal (and unconstitutional) in the South and is available in the North only under very limited circumstances. So why do we have such a strong anti-abortion movement here?

Very simply, because these groups found that they could use the abortion issue, which is after all very emotive, to stop the liberalisation of Irish society. But they don't only want to stop the clock but to turn it back and while focussing on abortion, they usually manage to include as "part of the abortion trend" sex education, homosexuality, contraception, divorce and sex outside marriage. They even attack Rape Crisis Centres as being "sex-obsessed"

SPUC (Ireland) was formed in July 1980, just days after a visit to Dublin by two of the leading figures of SPUC (UK). Both organisations have close links to like-minded bodies in the United States where much of the funding for British SPUC comes from and where the idea of a "Human Life Amendment" to the Constitution was first thought of.

The people behind SPUC are not simply a group

of ordinary citizens concerned about "protecting the life of the unborn". They believe moves to liberalise sexuality are part of an international conspiracy to subvert the Church, the family and private property.

SPUC's real leaders keep a very low profile and many of them have long histories of involvement in right wing moral crusades. The key man in the South, never known to have made a public speech, and desperate to keep out of the limelight, is John O'Reilly. O'Reilly is the boss of SPUC's secret and all-powerful Inner Council. A former member of the ultra-right wing Knights of Columbanus, he founded the Council of Social Concern in 1976 with fellow Knight and right wing crusader Niall Darragh. The Council, which shares premises with SPUC at Stradbrook House in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, aims to oppose "undesirable social changes being imposed or promoted by alien minority pressure groups".

Darragh also founded the Society to Outlaw Pornography (STOP) once based at the HQ of the Knights of Columbanus but now moved in with SPUC at Stradbrook House.

In 1980 O'Reilly helped found the Irish section of the British right-wing lunatic fringe group, the Responsible Society. It, too, was based at the Knights of Columbanus. In Britain this outfit fought against the provision of sex education in schools. In Ireland they opposed the establishment of Rape Crisis Centres because they might lead rape victims to seek abortions. It also fought the abolition of the status of illegitimacy. Now renamed Family and Youth Concern, O'Reilly is its secretary.

The 1983 anti-abortion referendum campaign was masterminded behind the scenes by John O'Reilly who is reputed to have a direct line to leading figures in the Catholic Church as well as to any number of top businessmen from whom he obtains enormous financial support - none of it declared in SPUC's company accounts.

O'Reilly surfaces again as treasurer of Family

Solidarity, the organisation he helped launch in 1984 to provide the shock troops in the anti-divorce referendum. Family Solidarity supports child tax allowances - but only for the children of married parents. It also opposes such organisations as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, believing parents should be free to discipline their offspring without interfering busybodies poking their noses in.

Another of SPUC's leading backroom figures in Bernadette Bonar. Like O'Reilly she is a member of its Inner Council. Like him, too, she is deeply involved in the Responsible Society-Family and Youth Concern, of which she is chairperson. Her most public role was vice president of PLAC, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign, which fronted the 1983 fight to have abortion declared unconstitutional in the Free State. She is an executive member, and former vice chairperson, of Family Solidarity.

The public spokesperson of Family Solidarity in the days of the divorce referendum was Jerry Collins, a solicitor with links to right wing organisations in America, who is now masterminding SPUC's legal battle against the Students' Unions and anyone else who distributes information about abortion.

SPUC's current chairman, Stephen Price (another very secretive man who never plays a public role), is a former member of Family Solidarity's executive.

Another Family Solidarity executive member, and former chairman, is Michael Lucey, businessman husband of Dr. Mary Lucey, president of SPUC and its most public face.

Students for Life deny they are linked with SPUC. Yet Mary Lucey was the guest speaker at a major Student Pro-Life Movement conference after the 1983 anti-abortion referendum. Her speech was never publicised. "It would be wonderful indeed if I could report a victory in the fight against abortion", she said, "but I cannot. The fight is just beginning...we have all the forces of evil against us".

The "battle" was against much more than abortion. It was against "the spurious cause of feminism". "This pernicious new thinking", Dr. Lucey declared, "asserts that our bodies are our own", and tries "to justify to women this so-called right to control their own fertility...This is what we are fighting in Ireland now. No the fight is not won."

For SPUC the fight will not be won until they've silenced the voice of every woman who has had an abortion, the voice of every woman who believes she has the right to have one and the voices of the vast majority of Irish people who were assured by SPUC and PLAC that putting the anti-abortion amendment into the Constitution would *only* mean that abortion couldn't be legalised in the Free State and would *not* have any other implications for women.

SPUC succeeded in stopping Open Door and the Well Woman Centre from referring women who had decided on abortion to safe, cheap and reputable clinics in Britain. As a result of the court injunctions which SPUC got to stop abortion referrals, many women also missed out on the non-directive counselling which these Centres offered women with unplanned pregnancies. So they went to England not knowing what the operation would be like, how they would feel afterwards, how much it would cost and whether the place they were going to had the highest possible medical standards.

But at least women could still fairly easily find the phone numbers of British abortion clinics - in student union handbooks and in women's magazines that carried advertisements for charities like the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which provides relatively cheap abortions. However, SPUC's campaign to stop the students' unions distributing information about abortion has affected not just students but all women living in Ireland.

As a result of SPUC's injunctions prohibiting the students' unions' distribution of abortion

information, British magazines stopped carrying information on abortion in their Irish issues. This has not stopped Irish women from going to England for abortions. What it has done is to force women to go in fear and ignorance - not knowing where and if they can get an abortion.

No matter what SPUC do, Irish women will still have abortions. They will still have abortions just like the women of Ceausescu's Romania did even when they were thrown in prison, subjected to degrading public gynaecological examinations and maimed for life by botched backstreet abortions.

SPUC can make it more difficult, more expensive, even more dangerous for Irish women to have abortions. They cannot stop them. All over the world women have shown that if they decide they cannot continue an unwanted pregnancy, they will risk anything including their own lives to carry out their decision.

SPUC's campaign has, to date, been highly successful in intimidating people into accepting a level of censorship that would be condemned by all if it were imposed in Romania or China. But SPUC can be stopped. Ireland in the 1990s is very different to the Ireland of the Mother and Child Act in the 50s.

There are many more women at work and most of them want fewer children than their mothers had. The average age of marriage is rising and the birth rate is dropping. More than three quarters of Catholic married couples use some form of contraception. Between eighty and one hundred thousand women have already had abortions.

SPUC can and must be stopped. Their attempts at bringing the country back to the censorship of the 20s and 30s must be halted. Their court injunctions must be defied - by Labour and Workers Party TDs, by trade union and student union publications and most importantly by a mass campaign on the streets, in colleges and in workplaces.

Anyone needing information about abortion should telephone Dublin 794700 or contact the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, London SW1
Tel: 222 0985.

The Catholic Church

Behind all these anti-abortion groups stands the power, influence and money of the Catholic Church. In Ireland, North and South, the power of the Church over education has played an important role in ensuring that abortion is seen as a moral issue, not a political one. Children at school are shown lurid films and photographs of bloody fetuses and given sentimental prayers and poems. ~~Abortion~~ kills children, they are told. Naturally they react against this. If abortion kills babies who can think like the one in the "Diary of the Unborn Child" then it must be wrong. But fetuses and embryos are incapable of conscious thought, still less of writing a diary. So why does the Church invest them with such attributes?

It all boils down to the soul. According to Catholic teaching, the soul enters the body at the moment when the egg and sperm meet, at conception. Because it has a soul, the just-fertilised egg, embryo or foetus is, to the Church, as much a human being as the adult woman who carries it; so abortion at any stage of foetal development is murder.

The Church hierarchy's insistence on putting the "soul" of the foetus before the life and happiness of the woman is most obvious when the woman is carrying an anencephalic foetus, that is a foetus without any brain. Most of these will be still-born,

a small minority will live a few hours. None survive longer than 36 hours. Women now discover this tragic fact at five months of pregnancy. Yet in the South of Ireland, because of the Church's dominance of hospital ethics committees, these women are forced to carry the pregnancy to full term and go through the pain of labour in the certain knowledge that they will not have a baby at the end of it. Only the possibility of baptism at the moment of birth is used to justify the lack of medical intervention.

Most fertilised eggs never get to be babies - "nature" or "God" discards them before birth. Well over half do not implant and are washed away in a normal menstrual period. Up to a further quarter are implanted but are lost in early miscarriage, often before the woman even realises she's pregnant. Of the less than twenty-five per cent of fertilised eggs that become established pregnancies, a further proportion will be lost through spontaneous miscarriage. What those who believe that a foetus is a full person from the moment of conception have to face up to is that "God" or "nature" is responsible for the greatest loss of unborn life, the greatest number of abortions.

The Catholic Church didn't always condemn abortion totally. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that abortion was not a mortal sin up to forty days of pregnancy in the case of a male foetus and up to eighty days (nine weeks) in the case of a female one! Until the last century, it was generally accepted that abortion was only a minor sin until "quickening" - when the foetus started to move. Apart from a three year period 1588-91, it was not until 1869 that the Church came out against abortion from the moment of conception.

The total prohibition on abortion coincides with moves to save the working class family which, in the advanced capitalist countries, had nearly collapsed during the Industrial Revolution. The ban on abortion was part of the move to marginalise women from the

- workforce and to ensure that the individual family, rather than society as a whole, would be responsible for raising the children who are the next generation of workers.

Both Church and state allow killing in certain circumstances - self-defence, a 'just war' (even the killings of non-combatants) and capital punishment. But while Church and state *justify beforehand* any policeman who kills in self defence, any soldier who kills in a war situation, any government that hangs the wrong person (or shoots them down in the street), both *condemn beforehand* any woman who has an abortion.

Many lay Catholics, and a number of nuns and priests, recognise how unjust the Vatican's attitude is to contraception and abortion. In America, they have come together in Catholics For a Free Choice - an organisation of practicing Catholics that campaigns for a woman's right to choose. Even here in Ireland, there are priests who are willing to accept that only the woman faced with an unplanned pregnancy can decide what is best for her own life.

The Church hierarchy, however, remains implacably opposed to both contraception and abortion. Why does the Church maintain this attitude to women controlling their own fertility? The reason it would give is the theological one of foetuses having souls that can never go to Heaven if they're not born and baptised. But the fact is that religion remains the most powerful weapon open to the owners of capital and wealth for keeping the exploited masses in fear and subjection. They are afraid that if women were to win the right to control over their bodies, this struggle would be extended to the masses of people, women and men, controlling all aspects of their lives.

A woman's right to choose to have children

Some women are forced into having abortions. Sometimes they are pressurised by unscrupulous boyfriends - or husbands - who refuse to face up to their responsibilities. But for the vast majority, it is because they fear that they'll lose their job or be thrown out of their family home or flat or that they simply will not be able to afford to bring the child up. This, too, represents a denial of women's rights. The right of women to have children if and when they want to is as much as socialist issue as the right of women not to have children if they don't want to. In Ireland the right of a woman to choose to *have* a child is greatly restricted by the lack of childcare facilities, proper jobs and housing and decent social welfare.

Public spending cuts which mean a decrease in workers' disposable incomes, rising prices and poor housing restrict this right further every day. In addition, high unemployment and low wages mean that more and more women *have* to work to support their family and so are unable to choose to have a child. Ireland likes to portray a children-friendly image. However, the reality is signs announcing that prams aren't allowed in shops; it's almost impossible to find a restaurant or shop with nappy-changing facilities; most restaurants don't keep high chairs, children aren't welcome in many guesthouses

and cafes and even for those with jobs, childcare facilities are either non-existent or prohibitively expensive.

North and South, state-funded childcare facilities are provided only for children who are known to be at risk of physical or sexual abuse. Even children with special needs - a mental or physical handicap for example - aren't catered for. In the South only two children in every hundred are in a state-funded nursery facility; in the North it's somewhat better with thirteen children in every hundred being catered for. It's worth noting that the UK average is 23 children per hundred attending nursery school and the UK is among the worst providers of childcare in Europe.

The health cuts and particularly the £10.00 casualty charge in the South have meant that many parents have to take risks with their children's health. While in the past, they'd have taken an ill child to the hospital outpatients "just in case", the £10.00 charge forces them to think twice. Thatcher's NHS review threatens to put parents in the Six Counties in a similarly difficult position. If GP practices start to run their own budgets, they won't want ill children, or handicapped children on their books unless they're able to go private.

Richer women can sidestep the effects of all these cuts. In the same way as money has always allowed them the choice of having an abortion, so money allows them to have a child on their own terms. They can afford to see doctors privately; can buy goods and services that make childrearing much easier - disposable nappies, convenience foods, a car to get around in - and they can pay someone to look after the child while they work or even have a live-in nanny or au pair. At every level it is working class women who are least free to choose; and with the cuts biting ever deeper they can't even be sure that the few facilities they have will still be there tomorrow.

During the anti-abortion referendum campaign of 1982-83, it was admitted by anti and pro-abortionists alike that single parents get a particularly bad deal in Ireland. PLAC (the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign) and SPUC both promised that, once the amendment was passed, things would change.

The status of illegitimacy would be abolished; single parents would get a better deal; there would be more support services for mothers and a less condemnatory approach to single, pregnant women.

They were lying. Since the amendment, the anti-abortionists have done nothing to help parents, single or married. "Support services" have been set up for pregnant women - in order to stop them having an abortion - but the ideology peddled by SPUC and its supporters has made things worse, not better for single parents. Leading SPUC members campaigned against the abolition of the status of illegitimacy but refused to campaign against "snooping" by Social Welfare officers which has led to many single mothers losing their "Unmarried Mother's Allowance". SPUC members have *not* campaigned against the cuts but have instead supported the political parties that have implemented them.

Socialists, on the other hand, have continued to defend the right of women to abortion and to information about abortion while at the same time fighting the cuts and the social attitudes that make life so difficult for all parents, but especially single parents.

The reality is that those who call themselves "pro-life" are only worried about unborn life. They cry about the "millions of unborn children killed every year in abortion clinics" but take no interest at all in the ten million infants under the age of one who die every year of malnutrition because profits would suffer if the milk, butter and beef mountains were distributed. Nor do they worry about the millions of children under ten who die each year from diseases like measles when even a tenth of one per cent of the

US arms budget would fund a vaccination programme which could eliminate those diseases world-wide.

It is in the fight for a better world where no mother has to watch her child starving to death or dying of measles that real concern for children is best expressed. And in general, those who support the right of women to contraception and abortion are far more likely than the "pro-lifers" to be involved in that fight. The reason is simple. We are concerned, not with theological arguments about potential human beings but with the right of actual sentient human beings to have control over their own lives, over their own bodies.

Women's liberation and socialism

The idea of women, or men, having control over their own lives is not compatible with the capitalist system we live under. Sure, it's theoretically possible to have free abortion on demand. And it's theoretically possible for the capitalist state to provide full childcare facilities. But as long as the economic system puts profits before people, such facilities will be provided only in so far as they suit the needs of capitalism, not as a means towards the liberation of women.

The experience of women in the Eastern bloc countries confirms this. In Romania under Ceausescu women were ordered to have at least four children, while in China they are not allowed to have more than one. The Eastern bloc treated women just like the West. In Ireland, many women are forced by the

element in any serious socialist programme.

The Socialist Workers Movement publishes a monthly paper and holds meetings all over Ireland, North and South. In *Socialist Worker* and at our meetings we put forward the ideas of revolutionary socialism and of women's liberation. If you are interested in the ideas expressed in this pamphlet and would like to know more about our politics, get in touch.

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The mere mention of abortion arouses great passion in Ireland. Both Catholic and Protestant zealots denounce women who have abortions as "murderers". Not a single political party, North or South, not even those who style themselves socialist, supports a woman's right to choose. Yet at least 80,000 Irish women - probably many more - have had abortions.

In this pamphlet Goretti Horgan speaks up for the right of these women to have made the choice that they did and argues that until women can decide for themselves if and when to have children, they will never be free.

Price: £1.00